

# Because We Have Daughters: A Promise in Place of a Poem

By Pearl Cleage



I have been trying to get my mind around the whole idea of men stopping violence. Even though I have been a supporter of this organization from the moment I knew it existed, men stopping violence is still a novel idea. Peaceful men are as rare as free women ...

All you have to do is turn on the nightly news or pick up the morning paper or stop in at a shelter for battered women or incested children to know that on a global scale and on the home front, too many men have not fully embraced the concept of stopping violence in themselves or in their brothers, fathers, uncles, sons, lover, friends, and co-workers, who are also our brothers, fathers, uncles, sons, husbands, lovers, friends, and co-workers.

During the early days of my feminist awakening, the constant threat of male violence against women was something we talked about a lot. Many of us were life long peace activists, but only as feminists had come to understand that we had the same right and responsibility to demand peace in our households that we demanded in our country's dealings with nations around the world. We came to see that the personal is always political.

But I still want to know why ...

Why are we still searching for ways to connect men to the women in their lives, absent the violence and control that still define too many exchanges that we call love or marriage or relationship when the words we should use to describe them are closer to the words we called upon when faced with the photographs of American soldiers torturing and sexually abusing hooded, shackled prisoners of war?

Why are the men she knows and often lives with still a greater danger to a woman's personal safety than car accidents, plane crashes and random acts of violence at the hands of strangers?

.. Why were children as young as three years old unsafe from male sexual predators, even in the places their government provided to shelter them from storms?

I do not have the answers. Even articulating the questions makes me feel anguish and outrage in equal measure because I know this is a problem that men can fix if they decide they want to fix it.

This campaign is important because it asks men to focus on their daughters, the assumption being that if a man can learn to love and respect one female being, those feelings can be expanded to include the rest of us.

Because yes, you are the fathers of daughters, but you are also the husbands and brothers and uncles and sons and lovers and friends and co-workers of women who are not connected to you by bonds of family and the mysteries of blood, but who also long for and deserve your peaceful presence in our lives.

I am here to confess that I failed to complete my assignment. I cannot write a poem for men to speak. Or a poem to speak to men. I am still too angry. Too angry that domestic violence is, and rape is, and incest is, and war is ...

I do not know the words to open men's hearts and minds to another way of defining and defending their manhood, but I know that redefinition is so vital and so necessary and so at the heart of the matter that I do not think we can survive as human beings unless men are prepared to do that important work, alone and in the company of other men and women who can show them another way to be men.

Loving a man does not always stop the violence. Bearing him a daughter or a son does not always stop the violence, and a poem cannot stop a slap, or a kick, or a rape in the bedroom of your own house or the backseat of your boyfriend's car.

So I come here to confess that I cannot write the poem yet that praises a new man and raises him to a place of honor and respect as if he was already the rule and not the exception. It is too early and there is too much work still to be done, bringing into creation this father who can love and honor every girlchild as if she was his daughter and every grown woman as if she was his sister or his mother or his wife.

There is still too much work to do to shape and sustain this father who can love and honor every boy as if that child was his son and every other man, his brother or his father or his friend.

There are men in this room who have made that journey and I am grateful for their presence and for their courage and for their comfort. I m counting on them -- on you -- to continue to do the hard work that must be done.

And in exchange, I will promise to leave a space in my head and in my heart for that new poem to be written when we gather to celebrate the end of male violence against women everywhere, and the dawning of a new day for human beings around the world. On that day, the language of men will no longer be a mystery to the women who love them, and we will sing together as one voice for peace and love and family and spirit and our daughters and our sons.

Until that day, don't stop/ don't stop/ don't stop ...

*(Delivered During the launch of Men Stopping Violence's Because We Have Daughters Campaign and Panel Discussion, Sisters Chapel, Spelman College in Atlanta, September 27, 2005)*